

Series 3 Episode 5

[00:00:00] Hello and thank you so much for joining me. This is the fifth episode of series three of *In Ten Years Time: How to live a creative life*. I'm so grateful you're here. I'm Tricia Duffy. I'm a songwriter, a media consultant, a singer, a writer, and a podcaster. And I'm here with an aim to inspire you to live a creative life. To find a balance of creativity that works for you and to encourage you to make your creative dream a reality. With a combination of small daily steps and the heady power of ten to help us, we will live a more satisfying life.

If you'd like to engage with this conversation, please follow me now @intentyearstimeofficial on Instagram or Facebook. I respond to all direct messages, and if there's a topic or question you would like me to research and discuss, I would love to hear your suggestions. I've spent the last few years [00:01:00] trialling ways to live a more creative life, and I'm distilling all I have learnt in thousands of hours of research into this podcast series so that you can embark on a similar journey.

In this series, we are exploring a theme of amplifying. And last time we dissected how to embark on a bigger project or collection of creative work. Today, I want to talk about pairing or combining. What does that mean? It's what happens if we mix multiple media. That is to say we bring together more than one discipline or craft or we add multiple materials or skills.

I believe that bringing something new into your creativity or even stepping out of your usual form to try something new can be really empowering and the results can be fascinating. You learn and you grow, and you may well end up making something that was entirely original as a result.

There are some art forms that have been combined for centuries, such as singing, dancing and acting [00:02:00] in musical theatre. There are records of collage techniques first appearing in China as early as 200BC. When we watch the Olympics, perhaps we are observing ballet or dance mixed with gymnastics on the floor routines or dance mixed with swimming for synchronised action in the pool. The question I want to pose in this episode is: what can you introduce to your creativity that could offer a different perspective?

Add a new element to the artefacts you create or even come up with a brand-new artform or philosophy. ‘But why?’ I hear you ask, ‘why complicate our art or craft with something new? Isn't it just diluting the purity of our art?’ I hear the tortured artist shout!

James Clear, author of ‘Atomic Habits’, talks about the importance of making habits to achieve success. Now, you know I have strong views about the success measures we use to judge our creativity. Episode one of the very first series if you are new here. [00:03:00] ‘Atomic Habits’ has been around for a while. It was published in 2018, but I highly recommend it if you haven't read it yet. James makes the point that even creative habits we enjoy at first, or are naturally inclined towards, can at some stage become dull. By introducing something new in combination with our preferred craft, we can keep the novelty and keep our practice feeling satisfying and engaging long term. Link to ‘Atomic Habits’ in the show notes, of course.

Let's bring this to life with some examples. I'm going to start by telling you about an artist I'm lucky enough to have met a few times. Her name is Tara Winona. She's a wonderful woman with a personality that lights up any room, and she happens to work in the studio right next door to the one I was based in during my residency on Johnson's Island, which I talked about in the previous episode.

She's an accomplished painter with exhibitions and galleries all over the world. And in another part of her life, she's also a laser art designer. You will have seen her work [00:04:00] if you watched the opening ceremony of the Paris Olympic Games. She's often inspired by nature and recently I was lucky enough to see some of her work on Johnson's Island during an open studio.

She showed us a painting of an elephant that was lit up from within the artwork itself. She'd combined conventional painting techniques with light absorbing, luminous paint, and a lighting system that allowed her to create a work that could be observed in a variety of stages of illumination.

On first glance, it looked like a regular painting of an elephant. Then she turned on a switch by the side of the painting, and now the elephant was illuminated from behind. Then she turned the lights off in the studio, and now the lit-up elephant almost seemed to be reaching out of the frame.

Finally, she turned the internal lights behind the picture off, and slowly, the light capturing paint she had used began to fade away.

She explained that she'd been inspired by the plight of endangered species and started [00:05:00] working with this paint to see if her pictures could make a statement. The species fades. Just like her paint does in the dark.

Her work is extraordinary and complex, but it really illustrates the art of what is possible if you take one thing and add another. I'll add a link to Tara's website in the show notes. You can jump on her mailing list if you would like to know when she's next exhibiting.

I would anticipate that this thinking is relatively easy to extend to other visual art forms. Perhaps you are a jeweller who has experimented with adding flowers into resin, or a flower arranger who adds objects to your arrangements, a candle maker who places crystals in jars of scented wax, or a stained glass artist who adds pebbles from the beach to your pieces. But what would happen if you added music to your painting exhibition?

Is there a pairing that can engage multiple senses? What about our sense of taste, our sense of smell, our touch? The way in which we [00:06:00] receive art, creativity and, well, let's face it, entertainment is through our senses. Could you create an environment that engages your senses when you work, or engages the senses of your audience when you share your work?

I'll include a link in the shownotes to an article in 'Psychology Today' that states engaging all our senses can enhance creative flow and alleviate creative blocks. For me, part of the magic of using our senses occurs simply by focusing in on them in detail. It quietens the mind just enough for ideas to start forming.

But there are other ways that senses can be engaged. A couple of weeks ago I was invited to a 50th birthday celebration of two wonderful friends. We got together in Bath for a weekend of fun and laughter. On the Saturday morning we headed out of the city to a vineyard to taste some English fizz. While everyone was drinking the gorgeous sparkling wine, the winemaker played some music and explained that he'd learned about a study where [00:07:00] participants had been asked to listen to music while drinking a variety of types of wine, and that this pairing could change the perceived

sweetness, acidity and fruitiness of the drink. Now I didn't have any of the wine, I had a tonic water because I was spending a little time on the wagon, but I noticed that when he played Vivaldi's Four Seasons, my mouth produced more saliva, and even a sip of tonic water played with different parts of my taste senses. Now of course, this could just be suggestion. When a group of friends get together to have a good time, are being hosted by a winemaker who tells a convincing story about the relationship between wine and music, we want to believe it. There were some sceptics, of course. But most of the guests believed that there was a distinct difference that was more than suggestion could account for.

Could you pair food or drink with your art? Could you create music to go along with your favourite wine or meal?

You know I always like to bring my ideas to life with [00:08:00] examples from my own work. So I want to tell you about a project I did at the beginning of 2024, when I had the idea to explore whether method acting techniques could be used alongside songwriting. Using the research methodologies I mentioned in the last episode, I was looking to combine two craft or art forms: acting and songwriting.

I set out on this project thinking I would use the acting techniques to write songs from the perspective of a multitude of different characters. I saw myself developing backstories from fictional characters in plays and books and of my own invention. But of course, projects like this have a habit of evolving.

After my initial idea had formed, I next researched method acting classes. I decided to work with holistic acting coach Alexander Ananasso from Method Campus. I signed up for the combination of one-to-one classes followed by a one-week intensive course close to where I lived in West London. Alexander was open to [00:09:00] working with someone who was not an actor. But as in my case, a songwriter. He had a lot of experience of running his class with directors, writers and other creatives in the past.

I'd done a bit of acting when I was a child and I loved it, so it wasn't my first time in an environment like this. But let me tell you now, acting - good acting that is - is really hard work. The method that Alexander teaches relies on tapping into the senses and becoming expert at recalling multiple layers of emotional memories and sense responses at the same time.

These are the things that we do naturally as human beings when we react to the world around us. And our emotions show like little poker tells, whether we like it or not.

For an actor, using the method, you need to delve into your past. Look for the emotions that are useful and that can be conjured on demand when a scene requires it. So how did I think I was going to use this skill, assuming I could grasp any of it, for my songwriting [00:10:00] practice? As I mentioned already, I thought I would pick monologues and characters and then use some method acting techniques to write songs while I was in character from the perspective of whoever I was playing.

But I also told you that projects never quite turn out the way you expect them to. For my very first session I was instructed to choose and learn a monologue. I picked a scene from *The Rose Tattoo* by Tennessee Williams. I'd always been fascinated by his writings since I was a teenager.

Now, this relates to the things I was discussing in the last episode about research and projects. I needed to explore why I was interested in Tennessee Williams. Just as you might benefit from exploring why you are drawn to a particular colour palette, or a theme for your art, or why you are writing particular characters.

This helps us understand our creative process more, and where our ideas are coming from. I had played a character from a play called 'This Property is Condemned' when I was a teenager, and the writing had made me fall in love with [00:11:00] all of Tennessee's work. I'd been given a copy of 'The Rose Tattoo' along with a collection of other plays for Christmas when I was about 15 by a beloved aunt and uncle. And there it sat all these years on my shelf. I hadn't read it in decades.

As I revisited the play and started to work on the character, I wrote a song. This was the intention after all. But something was niggling at me. I thought maybe there was another song in the play. Maybe even two or three. And so the idea, the development, the initial inquiry began. Could I write multiple songs from the perspective of a single character in one play? I've talked about limitations before. In the last series in particular, this is an instance when limiting my project really did set me free. The trouble with being able to do anything in our art is that the possibilities really are endless and that can lead us to stall or falter.

That blank sheet of paper or huge blob of clay or pile of silver wire [00:12:00] really could become anything. Paradoxically, those possibilities can hold us back. I'm a huge believer in giving ourselves forced limitations to respond to. And in this case, my intention - and therefore my limitation - became to write an entire album, that's 12 songs, from the single perspective of Serafina, the main character from 'The Rose Tattoo'.

The project started off pretty well. I started with the obvious. Serafina experiences loss at the start of the play, and using my own experiences of loss, I found it relatively simple to get into character and feel her pain. I use the word simple, you notice. It was simple because extreme grief, the overwhelming emotion I was looking to tap into, was one of shock and disbelief, and something that I have experienced myself. Simple, but not easy.

I'm going to play you a clip now of how I sounded when I was writing one of the songs in character [00:13:00] but using my own experiences. This is a work tape and the song evolved a lot from this recording, but it will illustrate the process well. This may be triggering as it deals with death, It's very short, but if you are feeling sensitive, skip forward 45 seconds or so.

[Work tape plays]

[00:14:00] I share this because although, as you can tell, this experience was upsetting for me, it also allowed me a means to process some of my own painful experiences. Serafina's husband is killed in an incident while driving his truck of bananas with contraband for the mob under the fruit. Clearly I've never experienced anything like that, as happily my husband does not work for the mob or drive a truck of bananas! And I should say that despite the tragedy in this play, Tennessee Williams did intend 'The Rose Tattoo' to be a comedy.

At the time I wrote this song, I'd recently been a first-hand witness a horrific traffic incident in Nashville, Tennessee. Yes, in Tennessee! The coincidence is not lost on me, and that's the thing with these projects, these coincidences are a kind of magic. Look for them and use them.

I won't go into details, but I will say that I was finding it hard to shake off the memory of the [00:15:00] crash. It was still in my thoughts all the time. The images, the sounds, the sense of time standing still in those moments as

the events unfolded. I guess that's the shock. Writing this song, as hard as it was, gave me some momentary relief from that experience and almost allowed me to both use my experience and simultaneously distance myself from it because I was in character as Serafina.

We must ask ourselves questions about what is good for us in the context of using our art to heal and deal with our pain. And in the context of method acting, there has been much criticism of it going too far. For me - and this is a personal view, you will have to make your own decisions about where your own lines are - I found pushing myself to the ends of my sadness, shock and grief served me well, not only in terms of my healing, but also because I am delighted with how the song turned out. The song is called 'Don't Speak'. It's not going to [00:16:00] be released for a while, but I will play out this episode with the demo of the whole song. So you can hear how it came to life. For your ears only.

For anyone interested in how songwriting can be used as a professional therapeutic practice, I will include a link to a book by Felicity Baker, who's probably the world expert on therapeutic songwriting. Some little distinctions to make here. She is a trained therapist and uses songwriting with her patients to help them with their recovery. When we use songwriting or art as a personal therapy, that is different to the professional practice. In my case, I used it to create and heal myself. And I know that many artists have experienced this phenomenon.

There is something else I want to talk about in this episode related to our many sides, skills, and ability. I suspect that you are already good at more than one thing. If you have a day job, it's conceivable that you've already done your 10,000 hours at that job and therefore you've achieved mastery. [00:17:00] If you are a parent or a carer, you are highly skilled at that, even if it doesn't feel like it some days!

Add in another skill, which you practice a little each day and you can add that string to your bow. At some stage in all our lives, I believe that we become polymaths. A polymath is a person of wide knowledge or learning. The derivation is Greek. 'Poly' from the word 'much' and 'math' from the word 'learn'. If you're a polymath, you are a 'much-learn'.

This entire podcast embraces the idea of learning and extending our skills, and I acknowledge with joy the skills you already have. We talked about the

long-term benefits of living with purpose and creativity in the second series. By striving to become a polymath to continue to learn and extend our creativity, we will feel enriched every single day. James Clear, who I [00:18:00] mentioned earlier, says that we must extend ourselves out of our comfort zone by exactly 4 percent to continue to feel fulfilled.

I'm not sure exactly how he arrived at that number or how we can possibly attempt to measure that for ourselves. But I do think that by adopting a learning mindset, we can become more satisfied. I'm going to draw on another example from my day job to illustrate this. In the consulting world, there's a phrase to describe the application of skills and knowledge known as 'T-based' consulting, which means that in one direction, say vertically, you have a specific expertise. In my case, in my day job, I'm an expert in strategy and change management techniques. Across the top of the T, the horizontal, is the industry or the environment a consultant specialises in.

In my case, I know more about the media industry than any other specific field. When my particular skills and experiences are optimised - that is when I'm working at the cross section of the two lines of the T - I'm most comfortable and probably [00:19:00] most able. However, I can do a pretty good job using the skills and experience I have with just one of the lines of the T, because my capabilities are deep enough that I can carry them to another industry.

For example, I once did a complex change management project for a buildings and real estate firm. Or I can work on a project that might not rely on my strategy or change management skills for an organisation that needs my knowledge of the media sector. For example, I once worked for a big tech firm who wanted to better understand what they called the 'traditional broadcast sector'.

Why am I telling you this? Because you are good at many things and maybe, just maybe, there's a way to take one of the lines of your T, and combine it with a new skill or craft to create something so original it's never been seen before. Can the poet combine their writing with art? Does the writer use their voice to create a Substack alongside their novel?

[00:20:00] Does the storyteller work with coaches to help them with their social media strategy? Do your project management skills extend to helping set up an exhibition to share your work? Maybe it's much smaller:

the knitter tries crochet. The painter picks up oil pastels. The potential for you to amplify your creative self really is endless.

I'm so excited for what you might do next. Please let me know if you decide to embark on something that combines crafts or skills.

Right, it's time for the challenge, the question and the recommendation. Quite predictably, the challenge I offer is to mix up your creativity. What can you add, combine, or experiment with that uses more than one skill or dimension? If you find it hard to do this straight off, I invite you to use a technique called ekphrasis, another Greek word, broadly means stories from art. It's usually a form of literature which may include a [00:21:00] song or poem inspired by a visual art form.

A great example of this is the song Vincent by Don McLean. The lyrics start, 'starry starry night,' inspired by Van Gogh's 1889 painting The Starry Night. But there's no need for us to be limited by this definition. You could, for example, create a poem inspired by a painting, a painting inspired by a classic book, or a photograph from a poem. The inspiration can go all the ways.

A question I would like you to consider is this: are you a polymath? What does it take to describe yourself as a polymath? Society loves to put us in narrow boxes when it comes to our skills. How can a person be a songwriter and a consultant and be any good at either? Maybe all it takes is practice. I suspect you are a polymath already.

Can you embrace the many things you have to offer and burst out of the confines of your CV or [00:22:00] LinkedIn profile? And how does reframing yourself impact your ten-year plan?

The recommendation. I would love to point you towards a series on Netflix that I know you're going to love. It's called 'Abstract: The Art of Design'. It's a masterclass the impossible. One to watch without your phone in your hand, you will become a co-conspirator in the practices of the designers and artists they follow right from the very first episode. And I hope it inspires you.

Thank you so much for being here. If you're enjoying this series, please follow and rate the series where you get your podcasts. It helps an

independent creative like me keep on keeping on. Speaking of keeping on, I'm keen to ensure this podcast stays ad free. I think it's better for you to listen to these episodes and get to your creativity without the pressure to listen to several minutes of ads.

So, if you can afford it and you've had some value from the series so far, please consider making a small donation. Think of it as buying me a coffee [00:23:00] so that I can keep the content as concise as possible. You will find a donation tab on my website where you can do that. Thank you so much for considering this kind and generous gesture.

Next time it is our interview episode! And I cannot wait to introduce you to Satch. Satch is a creative human being, a songwriter, a genre queer artist, a singer, a podcaster, a dad, a footy fan, an educator, a vulnerability expert, and I would describe him as a professional amplifier, the perfect person to round off this series with.

Until then, please engage with the conversation on Instagram or Facebook @intenyearstimeofficial. Sign up to my newsletter on the website and if you like the series, tell a friend. Until then, keep creating, peace and love. And as promised, here is the demo of my song, Don't Speak.

[Demo plays]